WORKING
September 6, 2009

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Psalm 90
1 Corinthians 12:4–11
Mark 1:16–20

"O, prosper the work of our hands."
Psalm 90:17 (NRSV)

One night when my whole heart was open to hearing from God
what I was supposed to do with my life,
God said, "Do anything that pleases you . . . and belong to me."

Barbara Brown Taylor
An Altar in the World

We take a deep breath this morning, O God,
between summer, too soon gone, and a busy fall.
In the rhythm of our busy lives, remind us again that
you are with us in every season of life.
Open our hearts and our eyes and our minds
to your creative love in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

I told my mother one time that I was bored sitting in church and would prefer to stay home. I didn't mind the hymns, and the sermon was sometimes OK: at least there was something and someone to look at. The most boring part for me, I said, was the minister's long prayer, which seemed to go on forever. To make matters worse, you were supposed to bow your head and close your eyes. I couldn't concentrate, no matter how hard I tried. She surprised me by saying that sometimes it happened to her, too, and that when she couldn't concentrate, she looked at her hands. They were right there, folded in her lap. She said she thought about everything her hands had done that week: the meals prepared, dishes washed, beds made, floors scrubbed. She said she also thought about holding my little brother's hand and mine as we walked down the street to catch the bus to go to church. So I began to do it, too: looked at her hands and my father's hands. His were much bigger, a railroader's hands, calloused, fingernails neatly trimmed but still with evidence of coal dust in spite of his vigorous scrubbing. He was a fireman on steam locomotives. His job was to shovel

coal from the coal car, or tender, directly behind the engine cab, into the firebox. He explained that you had to be able to heave the shovelful of coal in one smooth motion with pinpoint accuracy. If you missed and the shovel hit the opening, coal would fly all over the cab, which made the engineer very unhappy. Later he shoveled coal into the stoker, a large screw-like device that delivered and spread the coal throughout the firebox. Before he died, he became an engineer on a diesel engine and his hands were not nearly so dirty.

I often think about my mother looking at her hands in church, and it has occurred to me that she must have gotten the idea from the Ninetieth Psalm when it was read during worship, with its concluding lines: “Prosper the work of our hands. O, prosper the work of our hands!”

The work of our hands: so it’s not a bad idea, actually. I’m sure no one ever gets bored during worship. But if it ever happens to you, you might look at your hands and think about the work they have done.

Years later, a professor of theology, Joseph Sittler, in a lecture said that the Ninetieth Psalm was not only his favorite, it was, he said, perhaps the most important passage in the entire Bible. It has it all: the entire Judeo-Christian tradition and the gospel, in seventeen verses. It’s all there: The eternity of God—before the mountains were created, from everlasting to everlasting, God is our dwelling place. The idea of human mortality, which every human being sooner or later confronts: our lives, when we look back on them, are like the dream we can’t quite remember in the morning; like grass—it being the ’60s, some students thought that was pretty funny—like grass that is alive in the morning and gone by evening. Human transience: we are temporary, mortal. And yet there is joy and gladness in our lives, not morbidity and sad resignation, because of God’s steadfast love. Your life, the work of your hands, is precious to God: in God’s steadfast love, your work has eternal significance. Your work, in God’s eyes, prospers.

The late Studs Terkel wrote a bestseller some thirty years ago, *Working*: a collection of interviews with a wide variety of working people about their work, their feelings about their work, which ranges from love to loathing. The book, Terkel said, “is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash.”

In her recent book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor has an excellent chapter on work and vocation. She begins by listing all the jobs she has had in her life so far: “babysitter, Avon lady, horseback riding instructor, cocktail waitress, hospital chaplain, pastor, college professor;” seventeen different jobs in all. She says she still hasn’t given up on her secret job goal: Cirque du Soleil—not as an acrobat, she hastens to add; she’d be happy selling tickets.

When I read that, I put the book down and made my own list. You could do that today, celebrate Labor Day by making a list of all the work you have ever done. On my list there are twenty-seven jobs for which I have been paid. I won't bore you with the whole list, but it includes not only Pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago but delivering newspapers, bagging cookies at a bakery, digging ditches and cleaning sewers for the City Water and Sewer Department, delivering the mail at Christmas, waiting on tables, working in construction, supply teaching, working as a laborer at a Ford plant. The shortest job I ever had—two hours—was as a youth director at a Jewish community center. It ended exactly two hours after it began when the executive director decided I wasn't right for the job. So I became a night janitor for the University of Chicago instead, which I found to be far easier and more lucrative.

My goal as a youngster was to drive a city bus. I haven't given it up: I'd still like to do it. I am amazed at the skill of CTA bus drivers, maneuvering those huge monstrous vehicles through traffic, around corners. I also wanted to play centerfield for the Pittsburgh Pirates and having long since been overlooked by scouts and recruiters, the job I really want, my secret vocational goal, is Pat Hughes's: the Cubs WGN radio announcer. I'd love to be paid to watch baseball, talk baseball, banter and laugh with Ron Santo.

Our faith tradition has always included the conviction that God has something to do with the matter of working, vocation—or calling, if you will. But how exactly does it happen? How do you know what you are meant to do and supposed to be?

Barbara Brown Taylor says that she used to think there was one particular thing God wanted her to do with her life, that God had a singular purpose for her and her job was to discover what it is. But like most people, she wasn't sure what it was. She waited for a voice to tell her what to do. She went to seminary in part to try to discover the answer. She prayed every night for God to speak. And then one night, something happened: in a voice in her head God said, "Do anything that pleases you . . . and belong to me."

It was a great moment. She realized that God suggests overall purpose but not particulars, that God did not care if she became an Episcopal priest or a circus worker, that it was not *what* she decided to do for a living but *how* she did it. She was to live for God and belong to God and to love neighbors.

One of the great theological breakthroughs of the Reformation is in the idea —both Martin Luther's and John Calvin's—that everyone, not just clergy, has a vocation. Prior to Luther and Calvin and still popular is the idea that God calls clergy, that clergy have vocations. The Reformers insisted that everyone is called to glorify and love God, to love and serve neighbor,

regardless of how he or she earns a living and no job is more important, more essential, in God's economy than any other job. God needs street cleaners and surgeons, schoolteachers and plumbers, software designers and seamstresses, parents and pediatricians, clerks and social workers and physicists. Regardless of what a person does to earn a living, God calls all to belong to God and love neighbors—our common vocation. Luther called it the priesthood of all.

St. Paul told the early Christians in Corinth that there are obviously a variety of gifts. Even in the church there are different skills and interests: some can teach, some can preach, some can sweep floors, some can serve on the Finance Committee, some can give money—everyone has a job, and all jobs are equal in God's sight.

Since all jobs are of equal status in God's eyes, no task is too small. Taylor says a mother who is spending every waking moment changing diapers and wiping applesauce off chins needs to be reminded that she is engaged in the work of forming a human being, maybe the most important work in the world. The school janitor in the evening is providing a clean and pleasant space for children to learn in the morning. The worker who turns nuts on the bolts on the left front wheel of a car he is assembling is assuring that children are driven to school safely (p. 115).

Every job brings us into contact with new people and teaches us new skills (Taylor, p. 108). I had the privilege of working during college summers for the City Water and Sewer Department, on a gang whose foreman was a remarkable German immigrant, Raymond Frank, a Bavarian Catholic, which it turned out most of the permanent water and sewer laborers were. He was a legend in the Water Department for his ability to keep his ever-present chew of tobacco in his cheek during Mass without swallowing. Franky was amused and curious when, during the last summer, he discovered that I was going off to Divinity School in the fall. The other summer hire was a Catholic seminarian with whom I became great friends. During those three summers, I met a fascinating group of men, who seemed to know how to do everything and a few of whom were fastidious craftsmen who were proud of the work they did and one of whom—the most fascinating to me—was virtually homeless, lived in his car and drank a lot and had opinions on everything, including religion, which he had no time for at all. I learned from Raymond Frank a very valuable lesson: that there is a right way to do every job. He was a fanatic about it, and he assumed it was his God-given assignment to make sure the two young potential clergy under his supervision learned well. There is a right way to sweep the shop floor, which Steve and I had to do at quitting time. There is a right way to handle a shovel, a right spot on the handle to place your hands, a right way to throw the dirt or gravel—just a little pull at the end which sends the dirt or gravel where you want it—a right way to handle a paintbrush, a saw,

hammer, screwdriver; a right way to hose off, dry, and even apply a sheen of oil to tools at the end of the day so they last for decades. There is beauty in work well done, whatever it is.

But the truth is that sometimes work is not satisfying, no matter how well it is done. Sometimes work is deadly, boring with no hint of meaning or joy. Sometimes your work is the way you earn a living in order to pursue your real vocation. My railroader father, until late in his life, hated his job. I understood later that it was more regret than hatred. He had a rare opportunity to go to college: the youngest of his family, his father was a foreman in the Railroad shops, and saved enough to send his youngest to college. But my father didn't study at all—he had a great time he told me—and after a year flunked out. I asked him once what he had wanted to be. "A doctor," he said. He never mentioned it again. He lived a life of regret: became a railroader at the end of the Depression, found joy in his real vocation as a gardener, and made sure that his sons followed dreams, whatever they were, and never missed the opportunity he had.

What each one of us needs to do is identify what we most dearly love, what interests excite and compel us, what we are passionate about. That is your vocation, what God calls you to, and what God has uniquely equipped you to do. If you can earn your living doing it, you are profoundly blessed.

Greg Mortenson's book, *Three Cups of Tea*, is the fascinating account of how a climbing accident in the remote mountains of Afghanistan and rescue by villagers led to helping build a bridge, then a school, with Mortenson managing, acquiring materials, transporting, and finding ways to finance the project. A supporter, Jean Hoerni, became interested in what Mortenson had done and offered to help. After a dinner one evening he said to Mortenson, "You love what you're doing in the Himalaya and it doesn't sound like you're too bad at it. Why don't you make it a career? The children of those other villages need schools too. . . . What if I endowed a foundation and made you the director? You could build a school every year." And that is pretty much what has happened, right up to the present. Mortenson discovered what he loved and found a way to do it: building schools for Afghan boys and girls and, in the process, changing and saving lives.

People who decide that their love is children and the education and nurture of children make a conscious decision, when they become teachers, to earn less money than they might otherwise. I think they are heroes and heroines. And sometimes they continue to do other jobs to pay the rent so they can pursue their love of children and teaching by becoming a tutor or a Little League coach or a Sunday School teacher.

Julia Child and Julie Powell, in a delightful book and movie, *Julie and Julia,* both make important and risky decisions to do what their hearts compel them to do: Julia Child fulltime, with her husband's job providing security, and Julie pursuing her vocation after hours while continuing to work at her day job.

Taylor says, "The point is to find something that feeds your sense of purpose and to be willing to look low for that purpose as well as high. It may be chopping wood and it may be running a corporation" (p. 120).

One day a young man was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. His name was Jesus. He was from Nazareth. He saw two men working, fishing. "Follow me," he said, and they did just that: Simon and Andrew dropped their nets and followed. A little later he encountered two more fishermen, sitting in their boat, working on their nets. "Follow me," and James and John stepped out of the boat and followed. There was no job description for following Jesus. There was just his invitation and their response. He didn't ask them to stop being fishermen. I like to think that they continued to practice their trade after they decided to follow: earned a living the rest of their lives, fishing and following Jesus. We know that Paul was a tentmaker by trade and continued to work off and on as needed. I like to think that Jesus himself did a little carpentry in his family's shop in Nazareth in between teaching and healing, that when his family needed income for food, he came home and produced a table and stools to sell or dug a foundation and helped build a house for a customer.

The decision to follow him, then and now, may or may not mean a change of jobs. It is to embrace a vocation—to belong to him, to live for him, to be his man or woman for as long as we live.

President Barack Obama, delivering the eulogy at the memorial service for Senator Edward Kennedy last week, reflected on the topic of vocation and said,

> We cannot know for certain how long we have here. We cannot foresee the trials or misfortunes that will test us along the way. What we can do is to live out our lives as best we can with purpose, and love, and joy. We can use each day to show those who are closest to us how much we care about them and treat others with the kindness and respect that we wish for ourselves. We can learn from our mistakes and grow from our failures. And we can strive at all costs to make a better world, so that someday, if we are blessed with the chance to look back on our time here, we can know that we spent it well; that we made a difference; that our fleeting presence had a lasting impact on the lives of other human beings.

The decision to follow Jesus, I think, comes within the decisions each one of us makes, every day, to be the person God has created us to be, to use our God-given skills, our gifts, our passion, our time, our resources, our lives to glorify God, love God and our neighbors.

“Follow me,” Jesus said. “Do whatever pleases you . . . and belong to me.”

“O, prosper the work of our hands!”

Amen.

Ann-fyi

Navy Midshipmen’s Reunion
9/6/09

Beginning in the latter part of 1940, hundreds of recent college graduates convened in Chicago — our neighborhood — at Northwestern University's downtown campus for a shortened course to become commissioned Naval Officers. They were housed in Abbott Hall (Superior at Lake Shore Drive) and in Tower Hall (Michigan at the Water Tower) which is now the Administration Building for Loyola University. By the time the Navy Midshipmen's School was closed in the middle of 1945, more than 21,000 men received their training and were commissioned as officers. The purpose of this school and the schools at Colombia University and Notre Dame was to provide leadership for the two ocean war in the Pacific and in the Atlantic. The Naval Academy in Annapolis, with its longer program, was unable to provide enough officers for the two ocean fleet. While in Chicago, many of these midshipmen were marched to Fourth Presbyterian Church for Sunday worship.

A few of these men gather annually for a reunion — this year here in Chicago— coordinated by Bob Wilch — the Rev. Robert Wilch, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Bishop, father of Elder and Trustee Jan Feldman — they intimate it may be their last. I hope not. They are here voluntarily this morning unlike 65 years ago. . . It is my very great honor to welcome you back to Fourth Presbyterian Church and to thank you for your service to our nation.